



In the Public Eye

News and Features

AMA criticized for calling for condoms in schools

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A report by the AMA advocating the distribution of condoms in schools and downplaying the value of providing education on abstinence only programs is drawing the ire of political leaders and physicians. They argue that the policy is irresponsible social meddling and is politically motivated.

"This report shows the degree to which the AMA is being held hostage to political and philosophical ideology at the expense of sound science and the health interests of Americans," said Dr John Diggs, spokesman for the Consortium of State Physician Resource Councils, a group of 14 state organizations representing more than 2,000 American physicians. "The AMA's report contains no new data and simply parrots the same line the condom industry has been spouting for years."

At issue is the long-running debate of what should be emphasized as part of sex education for teens, the role of abstinence-only programs—especially for those who

have not yet become sexually active, and the role of programs promoting safer sex for those already having sex.

The AMA's policy, approved without fanfare, has begun to circulate, and some doctors, including Representative Tom Coburn, a Republican from Oklahoma, have criticized it as "politically correct" and medically irresponsible. For its part, the AMA has defended the policy as prudent and based on science.

"I think we're on the side of angels on this," says Dr John C Nelson, a member of the AMA's Board of Trustees. Dr Nelson argues that the US Surgeon General, David Satcher, also supports the policy, as do groups such as the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

The AMA's new policy was developed last December at the group's annual meeting of its House of Delegates, which was held in San Diego, California. At the meeting, the group's Council on Scientific Affairs pre-



Middle school students are encouraged to postpone sexual involvement

AP Photo/Rob Child

sented a revised policy on sexuality education, abstinence, and the distribution of condoms.

According to the text of the policy, the group concluded that, based on scientific studies including a recent one in *JAMA*, safer-sex programs can be effective in helping teens postpone the onset of sexual intercourse. The policy states that programs to distribute condoms in schools help increase condom use without hastening the onset of sexual activity; it also states that abstinence-only programs are of "very limited value" and require rigorous evaluation "before they can be supported as changing students' risky sexual behavior."

The new policy requires that several sections of the AMA's existing policy be scrapped. As a result, the AMA will no longer say that it supports efforts to "make abstinent sexual behavior more socially acceptable." It also no longer says that it supports public health education that teaches teens that "premarital sexual abstinence is an effective means of avoiding unwanted pregnancy and other health risks."

The new policy has drawn particularly strong criticism from Dr Coburn, one of the few practicing physicians in Congress and a member of the AMA who has worked with

the group on other issues. Dr Coburn accused the AMA of breaking with "common sense" and "sound medical principle."

"We would not be satisfied with promoting filter cigarettes to reduce lung disease, nor would we urge drunk drivers to be sure to wear seat belts," the Republican congressman wrote in a letter to the AMA's president, Dr Thomas R Reardon. Dr Coburn has made the promotion of abstinence education and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections a hallmark of his five years in Congress.

"I am extremely disappointed in the AMA," says Dr Coburn. "The AMA promotes the best medical advice in every other area of public health except sexuality," he says. "But when it comes to sex, we don't have the courage, as an institution, to give the best medical advice, which is to be sexually abstinent—until you're in a married, monogamous relationship—due to the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases."

The AMA believes that the jury is still out on abstinence-only approaches, and its report points out that most programs on adolescent sexuality already include a strong message encouraging abstinence along with other fea-

tures. "Clearly, little evidence is available to support the effectiveness of an abstinence-only approach in delaying the onset of intercourse among adolescents," the AMA report concludes. It cites one study which indicated that many abstinence-only programs have not been evaluated.

Amid the recent flurry of criticism, other groups are beginning to step forward to defend the AMA's statement, including James Wagoner, president for Advocates for Youth. "Ignorance is nobody's ally in the era of AIDS," Mr Wagoner said. "What politicians need to realize is that denying young people critical information about contraception is not only naive and short-sighted, but irresponsible and dangerous."

Dr John C Nelson, an AMA trustee, said that the group's policy is responsible. "We don't have the right to legislate morality," he said. "We're trying to make a policy that fits everybody. We're saying that families should teach sex education at home—that's the best place to teach it. If it's not done there, then the fallback is the school. But whatever we teach, let's have some science behind it. If we're faulted for that, I don't know how to respond."

Bayer made to tone down aspirin advertisements

Deborah Josefson, San Francisco

The pharmaceutical company, Bayer, has agreed to mute its advertisements, which propagate the idea that daily use of aspirin is beneficial for all adults. The agreement comes after the US Federal Trade Commission and the US Department of Justice charged that Bayer's aggressive aspirin marketing campaigns are misleading and may lead to medical complications in uneducated consumers. In particular, officials were concerned that Bayer made unsubstantiated claims that regular intake of aspirin could prevent myocardial infarcts and ischemic strokes in healthy adults.

While there is substantial evidence that aspirin is beneficial for patients with coronary artery disease and occlusive vascular disorders, little evidence exists that healthy people can be protected from cardiovascular disease or strokes by taking aspirin regularly. As well as the risk of aspirin causing hemorrhagic complications, such as bleeding ulcers and hemorrhagic strokes, it can worsen renal failure

and hypertension as well as aggravate asthma in some patients. Aspirin and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs have been implicated in an estimated 16,500 deaths annually.

Under the settlement, Bayer will spend an estimated \$1 million in a public education campaign that will warn consumers of aspirin risks. The Federal Trade Commission is requiring Bayer to distribute educational brochures on the matter, which will be available as reprints in doctors' offices and in full page print advertisements in major magazines.

The campaign, which started in February, will run through March. Brochures can be ordered by calling 1-800 332-2253.

In addition, all advertisements trumpeting aspirin's cardioprotective effects must carry the following disclaimer: "Aspirin is not appropriate for everyone, so be sure to ask your doctor before you begin an aspirin regimen." The advertisements will also state that "for healthy people without any symptoms of

heart disease, the risks of aspirin therapy may outweigh the benefits."

In a statement, a Bayer spokesperson said that the company had always encouraged patients to seek a physician's advice before starting to take aspirin and that the dispute with the Federal Trade Commission revolved around how strongly this point was emphasized. The dispute was on matters of degree and not substance, the spokesperson added.

Claude Lenfant, director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, applauded the agreement: "The educational campaign will help clear up possible confusion about the proper use of aspirin in the prevention of heart disease and stroke," he said.

The settlement must be approved by the US District Court in New Jersey, where the US headquarters of Bayer are located. In a related matter, Bayer will pay \$30,000 to each of the states of New York and Connecticut to settle similar claims.